DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 353 063 PS 021 012

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TITLE What Do Parents in Belgium and Britain Want Their Children To Learn in the Early Years?
PUB DATE Aug 92
NOTE 13p.; Paper presented at the World Congress of the Organisation Mondiale pour l'Education Prescholaire (OMEP) or World Organization for Early Childhood Education (20th, Flagstaff, AZ, August 2-7, 1992).
PUB TYPE Reports - Research/Technical (143)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Cross Cultural Studies; Cultural Differences; Foreign Countries; *Parent Attitudes; *Parents; Preschool Children; *Preschool Curriculum; *Preschool Education; Public Policy
IDENTIFIERS *Belgium; *Great Britain

ABSTRACT

For this paper on parental attitudes towards preschools in Belgium and Britain, information was gathered by means of individual and group interviews. It was found that parents in Belgium sent their children to preschool programs so that they could learn to become more independent and socially adept. Most Belgian children over age 2 attend these state-funded programs full-time. Belgian parents listed smaller classes and more physical education and music as desirable improvements. In Britain, where full-time, state-supported preschool education is not universally available, parents were more critical of the system. British parents wanted some provision for free or low-cost preschools for children under 3 years old, and more full-time programs and more access to state-supported preschools in general. Parents in Britain also wanted their children to spend more time on organized work, such as reading and writing, to prepare them for school. The continuing recession in Britain, and the educational policies of the Conservative government, seem to have British parents more concerned than Belgian parents about their children's success in school. (MDM)

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Paper presented at the XXth World Congress of OMEP (World Organisation for Early Childhood Education) at the North Arizona University, Flagstaff, USA, August, 1992.

ED353063

WHAT DO PARENTS IN BELGIUM AND BRITAIN WANT THEIR CHILDREN TO LEARN IN THE EARLY YEARS?

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Tricia David wishes to acknowledge grateful thanks for the Award from the Nuffield Foundation, which made the research, of which the work reported here forms a part, possible.

Introduction

A pilot project attempting to explore the similarities and differences in provision for children under primary school age in European countries was begun by seeking views on educational provision for children in Belgium and the UK.

Although early childhood educators find the historical, administrative divide of 'care' and 'education' anathema, it was considered that it would be important to begin by comparing provision which set out, in the first instance, to provide nursery education for young children in the two countries. The issue of provision which affords care for the children of parents (ie. this usually means mothers) so that they can go out to work, does enter the debate, however, as I will demonstrate.

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The project as a whole will look at the following aspects of provision in the two countries:-

1. what representatives of differing, major, political parties see as the type of provision which should be available for young children;
2. the views of children in those settings about the provision and why they believe they attend;
3. the views of parents (mothers only) about what their children experience, if their 'ideal'/high quality provision would differ in any way with what is available and why they hold these views;
4. the views of staff in the settings on what they consider constitutes high quality provision for children under primary school age.

Finally, it is hoped that by analysing all the qualitative data accumulated, together with documentation from the two countries, a sense of the position and status of young children and childhood in that society can be tentatively posed.

The above gives a resumé of the content aspects of the project. Additionally, there are two important methodological aspects the pilot project is intended to explore:-

* interviewing young children as a source of research data;

* using group, as well as individual interviews with parents and staff.

Interviews with parents

Parents in each of the two countries were interviewed either in small groups or individually. Some of the parents who were interviewed in a group were also interviewed individually, electing to do so after the group interview.

Staff and children were also asked why, in their opinions, did parents want children to attend the provision.

Although the staff interviewed in Belgium, where widespread preprimary provision under education has been available, as a right, for many years, suggested that many parents wanted their children to attend so that they could be free during the day (usually so that mothers can work), few parents gave this as their over-arching reason. On the whole, parents wanted 'maternelle' so that their children learned in the broadest sense - becoming independent, socially adept, and so on. None of the parents mentioned scholastic achievement/advancement, eg. beginning to read and write, as reasons for attendance, or as 'improvements' they would like to see in order that the system became closer to their 'ideal'.

Belgian parents mentioned the following as desired extras to provision with which they found little to criticise:-

* smaller classes
* more PE
* more music
* more flexible hours
* more trips outside school
* more child-directed learning
* better pay and status for staff
* better facilities and equipment - ie. more funding.

NB Around 95% of children aged 2.5 - 6 years attend the école maternelle full-time, and many of the schools operate a system of 'out-of-hours care' for children whose parents go out to work.

Meanwhile, parents in Britain, where maintained (ie. State-funded) nursery education is available in differing degrees in different local authorities, some 26% of three and four-year olds attend and another 26% of four-year-olds are taken into the reception classes of primary schools. Around half the population of this age-group attend pre-school playgroups, or the mushrooming private nurseries - but parents must pay fees in both these cases and children will only occasionally have the benefit of a qualified early years teacher if they are outside the maintained pre-primary system.

Parents in Britain seemed much more critical of the system as it currently exists, citing the following, for example:-

* there should be some free, or very low cost, group provision available for children under three too, for parents who want it;
* part-time provision is almost universal and it is not enough - more flexible hours, more full-time provision is wanted;
* better access is needed, many areas have no provision at all - the Government says it wants parents to have choice, that is why they refuse to fund a 'State' edu-care system, but there is no choice in reality;
* children attending nurseries could spend some time on 'organised work', such as reading and writing, preparing them for primary school.

Compared with a similar study of UK parents' views which I carried out in 1980, the last is an important development. Many parents then wanted their children 'prepared for school' but not in the specifics of reading and writing. Their views then were much more similar to those expressed by the current Belgian parents.

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Children's views about why parents want them to attend nursery

In both countries children seemed, on the whole, to feel that the question 'Why does your Mummy want you to come to the nursery?' was superfluous. Most simply said they did not know why. One of the few children who said he did not like attending appeared very thoughtful at this question, went away, and came back later, after playing (and thinking?), to say 'I suppose it's because she goes out to work.' The majority looked at me in the way young children do when they think you have asked a 'silly, adult question' and often laughed 'Because she does'. In other words, they have made sense of their lives by accepting that going to maternelle or nursery is something that people of their age do.

Messages for early childhood educators

As we consider the effects of 1992 and a united Europe, we are bound to wonder about the influences on our system of schooling, our policies about early childhood and our attitudes to what children should be expected to learn and to do at particular ages.

Certain currents influencing primary schools in the UK are causing some to wonder if we will eventually fall in 'line' and raise the age of school admission to six. However, the new National Curriculum, put in place through the legislation of the 1988 Education Reform Act, includes five year olds, so it is hard to see how the UK will 'undo' this, unless universal nursery education (to

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six) meant that all children were entitled to the National Curriculum before such a primary school start.

But what of the differing attitudes to what it is appropriate for children to learn before primary school?

In the latest of the 17 reforms to education from the Conservative Government in the UK, which continues in office into its fourteenth year, a White Paper was launched on Tuesday (28 July 1992). The new Secretary of State for Education, John Patten, stated at the launch

> 'Parents know best the needs of their children - certainly better than educational theorists or administrators, better even than our mostly excellent teachers' (Report in The Guardian 29.7.92)

As a parent and advocate of parental partnership, as a believer in the view that parents are the primary educators of their children, I agree that parents know their children best. As Lilian Katz suggested, parent-child relationships are 'hot', because parents 'invest' a great deal of love, time, effort, and so on, in their children. However, only the most informed parents, parents with the time and energy, know about schools, the education system, how children learn.

Parents in my study have, I believe, been bamboozled by the tabloid, Conservative, press, and by the pressure relating to the National Curriculum, into believing that

children need to learn to read very young, and that private education (for which one pays) is better than the maintained (State) system. When questioned about the effects of pressurising children into reading before they are five, my respondents in the UK said they recognised that this might have bad effects on their children. 'But what can we do?' they asked. 'We want our children to do well, to get jobs at the end of it all.'

Here we have evidence of the way in which our education system has been moved towards the instrumental to such an extent that parents of our youngest children are already thinking of their place in the workforce.

The recession which has Britain in its grip is resulting in adjustments to parental views of childhood. In Scandinavia, researchers such as Gunilla Dahlberg (1991) and Gunilla Hallden (1991), discuss the idea of 'child as project' and 'child as being'. At present British parents, much more so than Belgian parents, are operating in the 'child as project' mode - in other words, they are moving further and further from the concept of child development as a natural process, directed by inner drives. British parents are increasingly seeking to shape their children's lives and they expect preschool provision to help them in this task.

Clearly, parents in Britain seem to have absorbed anxieties about what will face their children when they

move on, and they have begun to attach a tremendous importance to reading and writing at an early age. Is this surprising and does it matter?

Parents in the UK have recently been assailed by articles in the press, following the introduction of the National Curriculum and especially, the previous Secretary of State, Kenneth Clarke's comments about the results of the reading assessments of children aged seven. He interpreted the fact that 24% of the seven year-olds did not reach the standard which had been designated 'Level 2', the expected 'average' for the age-group, as meaning a quarter of our children cannot read at age seven. Not only did he display a lack of knowledge about literacy, he displayed a lack of knowledge about statistics. However, it is likely that the way in which his views were echoed by the press (including those newspapers regarded as 'serious/quality' papers), would have had a profound effect on parents anxious for their children to do well at school.

Thus it is hardly surprising parents in the UK emphasise early literacy. Yet comparing official documentation about the curriculum for maternelle and nursery-age children, we find:-

> 'Le langage écrit mérite une attention particulière. Il ne s'agit pas d'enseigner la lecture et l'écriture, mais bien de fournir des stimulations au

travers d'une pratique fonctionnelle de l'écrit. Il s'agit de permettre a l'enfant de donner du sens a ce mode de communication et de faire ainsi ses premières hypotheses sur la facon dont fonctionne le langage écrit.' (Ministère de l'Education, de la Recherche et de la Formation, 1985; p.8).

'Alongside the initial stages of reading, children often record their ideas, experiences and feelings through drawing, painting and writing. Teachers encourage children to write...' (Department of Education and Science, 1989; par.37)

and

'they begin to understand that print has a meaning and that reading is an important and pleasurable activity, and some will develop early writing skills.' (Department of Education and Science, 1990; par.37)

While I will admit that the UK documentation seems stronger - see for example the idea that children will have taken in the 'importance' of print - on the whole the two seem to encourage practitioners to make early literacy fun, and child-directed.

Despite the fact that I know this type of early literacy activity is available to the children in the establishments in the UK where I talked to parents, and also that staff believe they tell parents what the

children do during nursery sessions, and why, it seems we are not getting our message across. We are not demonstrating the ways in which children are learning about print, etc.

From the responses of the children I interviewed, it seems we are not using our best advocates - the children themselves - to get this message across. If we were more careful to encourage metacognition, discussing with children what they think they have learned, and why they come to the nursery, we might find that parents would be less anxious about their children's futures, and more aware of the massive amount of learning, including learning about print, that they have achieved.

Acknowledgement - I would like to thank Jacqueline Andries and Madeleine Brandt for their help in enabling me to undertake fieldwork in Belgium, and for providing me with copious amounts of literature, and suggestions for further reading; and the children, parents and colleagues in both countries who were willing to allow me into their schools, their groups, and their confidences.

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